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ABSTRACT

To explain the nature of the response process in journal writing, a simplified version of the theory of speech genres proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin is applied to excerpts from a journal by a college junior. Bakhtin's model of communication is continually interactive and dialogic, as though all voices from the speaker/writer's past are poised at the moment of utterance and spontaneously selected to suit subject, occasion, genre, and particularly addressees--and whatever voices "they" bring to bear on the moment of utterance. The theory's application to journals can show that journal writing is always part of a complex dialogue between students, teacher, and the melee of voices each individual brings to writing and reading. The excerpts from Janet's journal for example, illustrate the nature of the internal/external response process and also the manner in which the teacher's anticipated response determines how conventionally or imaginatively the generic form will be realized. To participate in the response process of journal writing, it is necessary to be the kind of respondent who takes the voices of students seriously and enables them to explore freely their own concerns, to experiment with language, and to break with convention. (MS)

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RESPONDING IN AND TO JOURNALS

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Abstract: To explain the nature of the response process in journal writing, Halpern presents a simplified version of the theory of speech genres proposed by M. M. Bakhtin and applies it to excerpts from a journal by a college junior. Emphasized throughout are the journal writer's spontaneous selection of and response to voices from her past even as she is, at the moment of writing, also responding to the anticipated responses of her teacher (and possibly others), who will read the journal. Included are suggestions on how teachers can most effectively respond to journal writing.

When we ask students to write in journals, we are usually giving them license to explore and experiment--to break away from the relatively fixed genres of essay exams or business letters and to play instead with the looser conventions (or non-conventions) of journal writing. Although our covert goals may be to encourage fluency or problem-solving or critical thinking--or simply to have students experiment with material they can draw on later in more formal assignments--we are always banking on journals to elicit responses. And we, in turn, are prepared to provide reponses to them.

Although we who teach writing can agree on the central role of response in journal writing, we have never explored the nature of the response process in which we and our students are engaged. What is this process? How does it operate in the journals our students write? How can

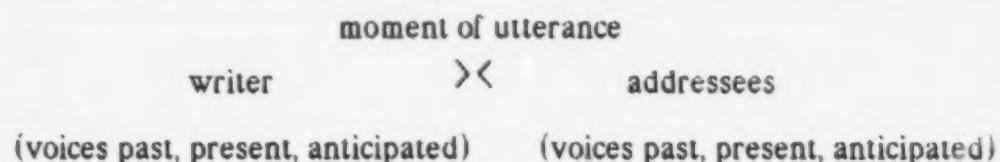
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an understanding of it enhance our own participation in it? I propose that a useful way to begin to answer these questions today is to focus on journal writing as it is illuminated by M. M. Bakhtin's theory of speech genres.

(Bakhtin, M. M. Speech Genres and Other Late Essays. Eds. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist. Austin: Univ. of Texas Pr., 1986, 60-102).

What is the response process?

Bakhtin's theory replaces the familiar, segmented model of communication--the linear writer-message-reader model--with one that is continually interactive and dialogic. It is as though all voices from the speaker/writer's past are poised at the moment of utterance and spontaneously selected to suit subject, occasion, genre, and particularly addressees--and whatever voices they bring to bear on the moment of utterance. As this figure suggests, any utterance responds to a melange of voices past, present, and anticipated.



The angle opening toward the writer indicates the writer's backward/forward motion of response at the moment of utterance, reviewing and responding to what has gone before even while anticipating what is to come. Similarly, the angle opening toward the addressees indicates that even as they are poised to respond to a specific utterance, they too are responding to voices from their past. But let me show you how this

simplified model applies to journal writing by examining four excerpts from a journal by Janet, a college student about whom I'll tell you more later.

Excerpt I

(5/7 2:22 PM) A word about journal writing. "Hate" isn't the best word to use in describing my sentiments towards this activity. I think that "intense dislike" is not only healthier but truer to the scope of my nauseous reaction at the very sight of this precious gem. Sometimes I feel that whatever experience I can write about wasn't worth having in the first place. It's rather like the physicist who completely overlooks the beauty of the wave because he's totally absorbed in the derivation of formulas for its motion. Maybe for some the "beauty" is in those formulas, in the quest and discovery of new "knowledge," but I'd rather sit on the beach in silence and awe. It's this very mute appreciation of the Life experience, that makes me loath to describe the moments with words, and makes me wonder what the hell I'm writing about in the first place. (2:48 PM)

(5/7 2:51 PM) Some months ago a friend and I were discussing suicide, and in passing the subject of notes I declared that "I'd never leave a suicide note because they'd probably grade it." (To this day I'm still in the dark as to whom this generic term "they" referred, and I have a sneaking suspicion that the end of this mystery now would save me a lot of grief in the future.) This suggestion of some arbitrary grading system haunting someone on into the grave is pretty scary.

Now imagine that the diagram above represents the response process in which Janet was engaged as she created this entry. The point at which the two angles meet is the moment at which Janet is poised to write. Coming in from the top line of the left angle are the many mingled voices Janet hears as she considers the theme about which she will write--voices she has heard or read in the past, voices of the teachers who have told her that journal writing is a required part of the course, voices of herself "sometimes" rebelling against her teachers' privileging of words over experience, voices of physicists who prize scientific knowledge, the voice of a friend conversing

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about suicide, the voice of society evaluating everything Janet does. And Janet, as she spontaneously sifts through these voices, and other voices not revealed in this entry, also responds to the contending voices she hears. Her internal response process is denoted by the lower line of the left angle.

Yet even as Janet is sorting through and responding to this congerie of voices, she is also responding to other voices--those denoted by the angle at the right, those of her immediate addressees, her teachers, and other possible addressees. In journal writing, we teachers like to pretend that our students are writing for themselves; the journal can, after all, be a most personal, individual genre. But we also know that our students are writing for us, their evaluators. As the angle on the right suggests, we as potential respondents also hear voices--professional, institutional, personal--and these voices influence our response to Janet's journal.

As Janet construes her entry, she anticipates what our responses will be. A pulse crosses the point between the two angles, influencing the voices Janet includes and also the shape and style her entry takes. We can see in the first paragraph of Excerpt I, for instance, Janet's explicit response to her teachers' anticipated interests in her metadiscourse on journal writing. And we can also see evidence of certain generic conventions that Janet assumes expected in the journal genre--for instance, introductory dates and times. Excerpt I suggests that we teachers--through anticipated and actual responses--exercise enormous power over how our students will use the voices available to them, how free or constrained their writing will be.

I do not mean to suggest in this explanation that journal writing is the focus of Bakhtin's theory, for it has far broader implications and applications. His theory pertains to all utterances, spoken or written, explaining, for example, exchanges in everyday conversation, articles written for

professional publications--even 4 Cs talks. I have applied this simplified diagram of Bakhtin's theory to journals to show that journal writing is always part of a complex dialogue between our students, ourselves, and the melee of voices each of us brings to writing and reading.

But let me backtrack a bit and tell you about the context of Janet's journal and about other entries she wrote as I explain in more detail her response process--and ours.

How does the response process operate in the journals our students write?

When I was resident ethnographer at the New England Literature Program (familiarily known as NELP) in May and June, 1986, I collected the complete journals of eight of the 36 college juniors and seniors participating in NELP. These journals contained virtually all the writing (and much of the drawing and noting-taking and listing) these students did during the six-week program, most of it self-sponsored, some of it assigned. The only instructions students received about their journal writing came from the curriculum handout which specified that students were "To keep a journal with regular entries on a variety of subjects and in a variety of modes." (Curriculum for NELP XII, 5/7/86, p. 2.) Students also learned about journals by reading others' entries informally and by sharing journal entries, if they chose to, in their weekly journal group meetings. All journals were read and commented on, orally or in writing, at the middle and the end of NELP by the members faculty who were leaders of each journal group.

The entries included here come from Janet's journal, which I selected at random--not because it reflects any special qualities but to see what it can tell us about the response process in journal writing. Excerpt I came from a very early entry, written when Janet didn't know her teachers very well.

Excerpt II, which follows, was written about half-way through NELP.

Excerpt II

(May 25, drawn from a 2-page entry) Can't get over how little of this writing smacks of the genuine. Seems like melodramatic renderings of forced sentiments. . . . Once in a great while something will trigger the expressible, and only then is my writing true to self. . . . Steady murmur of voices never stops, rises and falls ceaselessly. Like that Longfellow poem "The Tide Rises, The Tide Falls." . . . Lots of boats today. Rain keeps them away. Love the greenness after the downpour. Everything fresh, ready. Hand asking me to slow down a bit. Don't complain hand, you've rested long enough. Just occurred to me how silly this sounds, but can't stop now. One journal group had to write for an hour straight last night. Torture. . . .

In this entry, the sounds of contending voices become even clearer-- Janet talks to herself, hears the voices of others present, hears echoes of Longfellow, hears the rain, hears her hand complaining, hears other journal group writers discussing their writing--and in each instance, she responds to these voices in her own voice. Although Janet continues her musings on the writing-vs.-reality theme, we do not see in this passage explicit references to her teachers and their anticipated responses. But her writing is much more far-ranging, more whimsical, and it is not inhibited--Janet's hand can hardly keep up with her thoughts. Also, the form and style of this entry suggest a freer generic expression--a stream of consciousness, with topics on the theme loosely connected, and with subjects or verbs sometimes missing. By half-way through the NELP term, Janet has a much clearer sense of what her teachers value--and of how other students are playing with the journal genre.

By three-quarters of the way through NELP, Janet pushes the journal genre still further, toward a more complex consideration of the relationship

between words, life, and death and also toward less restricted expression, as Excerpt III shows.

Excerpt III

(June 4) Frost class. The successful completion of a coherent thought about Frost's "The Death of the Hired Man" would mark the glorious conclusion of a six-day writing slump. Even though my functional brain capacity has been idling close to the idiot level this past week, the reading of the poem had an interesting effect. While I read, the guttural tones of the poet resonated in my head, for the impression made by my tape recorded introduction to the poem still lingers. Hopefully the sound imprinted in my memory will not diminish, and will continue to enrich each future reunion with the hired man. (Subscript note with arrow up: "Forced. Please ignore. Kindly so.")

Reading Hawthorne I wonder whether he struggled with his words. Not that there's anything in the writing itself which would indicate that he did, but still they are the words of a dead man who can never be known again, never be asked about his writing. No matter what you create and leave to posterity, the legacy of death is one we all inherit. Born to die, as they say. But still we wonder, and wonderment seems to be the medium of all things living and dead.

Here, Janet's responses to two NELP readings reveal an explicit awareness that she carries with her and uses voices she has heard--"the sound imprinted in my memory"--implying a kind of permanence through language not evident in her earlier entries. And again, in the Hawthorne entry, she concludes that words--though perhaps hard come by--outlast death. Even while Janet is musing to herself on the permanence theme, however, she is also responding to her own words as "forced" and responding to the anticipated response of her readers by asking them to "Please ignore." She knows her teachers well enough by this point to assume that they will respond kindly.

These two paragraphs come from a four-page journal entry which also includes a pasted-in label saying "Fruit Salad," whimsical notes and poems from other NELPers, a passage by Janet on suicide, and several memories and imaginings. If there are fixed generic conventions for journals, then this passage certainly stretches them to the breaking point. Janet's teachers had, in fact, encouraged her during their mid-semester conversation about her journal, to experiment more, to play more with the way she put words on paper, a suggestion she followed above and in her last journal entry, Entry IV, written as a final assignment on the last day of NELP.

Excerpt IV

June 14

Hey, Picklehead!

Last night, falling asleep under the stars, I thought fondly on our old friend "The Learned Astronomer." Remember how I used to bitch about the overwhelming garbage heap of garbled nonsense that had to be systematically memorized, regurgitated, and then best forgotten? Sifting through the "knowledge," spewed "pearls of wisdom from the mouths of little babes," I yearned to leave every lecture hall and wander, true to Whitman's memory, staring up at the constellations in silence. At last, the astronomer in me has croaked, and I am free to enjoy the beauty of the heavens!

You can't feel the pain and triumph of mountain climbing sitting in Nature Appreciation class reading a book. And no one can tell you of the terror of wandering lost in a dark woods, or the wonder of falling asleep to the sound of wave and wind. Living so close to Nature, my love for its sights and sounds has become the education of a lifetime, and for the inner peace that Its knowledges gives, it is with joy that I now read and write. These pursuits are no longer the arduous tasks of days past, and I partake of them as eagerly as I do of canoeing, card playing, or idle conversation. The delicate balance I've always sought between work and play has been shot to hell. I know the joy and satisfaction in the pursuit of all things. No longer does my "education" isolate me to an obscure tormenting cubby-hole where my study painfully alienates me from myself and the living, for now I know to seek the teacher/student in all men. My companions these past six weeks have in the passing shared freely many of their gifts of self, and I feel the daily growth in each of us as we learn the arts of giving and trust.

Even as NELP XII nears the inevitable end, I carry with me part of each person's individuality and charm. Now I know the mystery of the loon's call. Now I know the challenge of every worthy climb. Now I am ready for a new phase of life.

Love,
Janet

(Note underneath with arrow up : "Rewritten. Better in student anthology.")

In this excerpt, Janet summed up her NELP experience. She also chose the long second paragraph of this passage as one of her three submissions to the student prose anthology, modifying it as shown in the handwritten version at the end of your handout. I'd like to make four points about Janet's last journal passage.

- 1--It brings together several contending voices and responds to each.
- 2--It resolves the central theme of Janet's journal, the tension between thinking/writing and experiencing life, at least temporarily.
- 3--It reveals a relationship between student and teacher, especially in the salutation (Hey, Picklehead!) and first paragraph, that reflects the freedom NELP students felt to express themselves, to experiment simultaneously with ideas and writing, and to anticipate a favorable response for doing these things..
- 4--It uses the familiar letter form for an essay assignment written in a journal to be revised as an anthology entry, that is, it plays with generic conventions.

In this entry, Janet illustrates not only the multifaceted nature of the response process but also the antigeneric possibilities of journal writing--its capacity to be anything the writer wishes it to be--record-book, log, diary,

notebook, repository of first drafts, aid to problem solving The growth in Janet's conception of writing matches her engagement in playing with writing in her journal. I should also add that later that summer and fall, Janet, a very reluctant journal writer at the beginning of NELP, hiked the entire Appalachian Trail, from Maine to Georgia, with a friend and wrote in her journal every day.

But now for the final question I want to address in this talk:

How can our understanding of the response process enhance our own participation in it?

We learn from Bakhtin how utterances of all kinds are construed and disseminated, and we see in Janet's journal an enactment of Bakhtin's theory in a specific genre. Janet's journal not only illustrates the nature of the internal/external response process but also demonstrates what we have probably guessed all along--that although journals can be among the most personal and flexible of written forms, student journals assigned in class have the teacher as their primary addressee. The teacher's anticipated response determines how conventionally or imaginatively the generic form will be realized.

If the voices students select at the moment of utterance and the form and style they adopt are so strongly influenced by us, their teachers, then our concrete responses to their writing will either discourage or encourage their engagement in the dialogic process. To discourage honest engagement, we need only impose our own themes and emphasize conventions that we, for one reason or another, associate with the journal genre. That is, we need only let our institutional and personal voices control the potential responses of our students. But to encourage honest response, we have to model the

spontaneity, flexibility, and consideration we wish to foster. We must, in our responses, take part in an ongoing dialogue about the themes embedded in our student's journal entries, raise questions, reveal the social voices we bring to bear in our moments of utterance. This may mean shaking off the sense that there is a "right" answer to a journal assignment and that we have it, and instead treating journals like comfortable conversations in which we and our students are engaged together. It may also mean reflecting, in our responses, the anti-generic possibilities of journal writing--through our own experimentation and resourcefulness.

I would urge you to participate in the response process of journal writing by being the kind of respondent who takes the voices of your students seriously and enables them to explore freely their own concerns, to experiment with language, and break with convention. Perhaps they, too, will someday hike the Appalachian Trail with a journal in their packs.

Janet's Revision of Her Last Journal Entry for Student Anthology

Inventory-Phase III: (June. 4)... You can't feel the pain and triumph of mountain climbing sitting in Nature Appreciation class reading a book. And no one can tell you the terror of wandering lost in a dark woods, or the wonder of falling asleep to the sound of wave and wind. Living so close to Nature, my love for Its sights and sounds has become the education of a lifetime, and for the inner peace that Its knowledge gives it is with joy that I now read and write. These pursuits are no longer the arduous tasks of days past, because the delicate balance. I've always sought between work and play has been shot to hell. I now know the joy and satisfaction in pursuing all of Life's activities, and now I know to seek the teacher/student in all men. My companions these past six weeks have in the passing shared freely many of their gifts of Self, and I felt the daily growth in each of us as we learned the arts of giving and trust. Together we learned to carry within a part of every person's individuality and charm. Now we know the mystery of the loon's call. Now we know the challenge of every worthy climb. Now, as we part, we know what it meant to be together.